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Corwin & Koenig: The Presidency Today

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THE PRESIDENCY TODAY. By *Edward S. Corwin and Louis W. Koenig*. New York: New York University Press. 1956. Pp. ix, 138. \$3.

The unending fascination of that unique institution, the American presidency, is revealed by the steady outpouring of books on the subject. If one includes biographies of presidents, the topic must be very nearly as popular with Americans as the Civil War—and a good deal more interesting to most foreign observers.

This fascination doubtless stems from a variety of sources: the vast power of the office combined with its representative, democratic aspects; the personalities of the presidents; the drama of domestic and international

politics; and the elusive, mysterious character of the office. Despite all the volumes on the presidency, this mystery remains; and the unsolved riddle of this mystery is, perhaps, how the presidency can be so many different things to so many different men. At its simplest, the presidency is a combination of cycle and secular trend. The cyclical fluctuations are associated with changes in the personalities and political influence of the incumbent, the secular trend with long run changes in the local and international environment of politics; yet it is obvious that personalities and political influence are by no means independent of the long run changes.

I wish it were possible to report that in the volume under consideration the two authors had thrown a brilliant new light on this great political institution. Professor Corwin (as the readers of this review do not need to be told) is not only one of our most distinguished students of constitutional law but the author of the best and most durable study of the presidency, entitled *The President, Office and Powers*, a work of great scholarship and weight. Professor Koenig is known for his excellent volume *The President and the Crisis*. One was therefore entitled to hope that the collaboration of these two scholars would help to unravel the mystery of the presidency.

But this was not, I think, their intention, and before condemning the authors for not writing a book this reviewer would like them to write, it is only fair to try to guess what their intentions were. The audience for which this volume is intended evidently excludes all those who already know the works of the authors. Very little is to be found here that is not already set forth in more detail in Professor Corwin's *The President, Office and Powers* or in Professor Koenig's volume. Indeed, those who are familiar with Professor Corwin's extremely useful, annotated *Constitution of the United States of America*, which he edited for Congress a few years ago, will find little new in the present volume. In this sense, then, I cannot repress a deep sense of disappointment.

Without undue professional bias, the audience for which this book would be useful might be defined as all those without a good, recent, introductory political science course on American government. A busy and harrassed lawyer who has not had the time to read the more substantial volumes mentioned above and who is looking for a quick brush-up on the presidency might well profit from an hour spent with the four chapters of this small book. It opens with an historical chapter entitled "The Presidency in Perspective," taken largely from Professor Corwin's earlier book, but written with greater sprightliness and wit. Some of the short characterizations are worth quoting: "Except . . . for a few unfortunates like John C. Calhoun and Nicholas Biddle, the Jacksonian 'dictatorship' was more bark than bite, more proclamation than performance." Of Lincoln: "His frontiersman's conceptions of the requirements of sound administration were no less naive than Jackson's, whose record as a spoilsman he far surpassed." "Few Presidents have surpassed Johnson in the exorbitance of his pretensions for the office, none in his inability to make them good."

The opening chapter is followed by chapters on "Presidential Prerogative," which the authors define as "a short term for power claimed by the President primarily on the basis of the Constitution itself," also drawn largely from earlier Corwin volumes; on presidential leadership, wherein the authors return to an old proposal of Professor Corwin for a Cabinet appointed from congressional leaders; and a final chapter on selection and tenure, in which the authors point out forcefully some of the important unresolved problems of this aspect of the presidency.

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